



Fed Probe Urged on Cancer Chemical in Marine Water

NC congressman urges probe into new report on cancer chemical in Marines' tap water at base

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The Associated Press

Wilmington, N.C. – A North Carolina congressman said Thursday that he wants an investigation into reports that levels of a cancer-causing chemical in tap water at a Marine Corps base were downplayed and then omitted from official documents.

Democratic Rep. Brad Miller called for the probe by his House science subcommittee Thursday — a day after The Associated Press reported on new documents that indicate massive fuel leaks at Camp Lejeune and high concentrations of benzene found in a water well there in 1984.

"I am just disbelieving of their failure to act. It may have been worse than a failure to act. They may have acted to minimize or prevent the risk from being disclosed," Miller told the Associated Press on Thursday. "It is hard to imagine they would let this go on. There was too much information that they had to have consciously disregarded."

Benzene, a carcinogen, is a natural part of crude oil and gasoline. Drinking water containing high levels of it can cause vomiting, dizziness, sleepiness, convulsions and death. Long-term exposure damages bone marrow, lowers the number of red blood cells, and can cause anemia and leukemia, according to the EPA.

In 1984, an environmental contractor found benzene at 380 parts per billion at a well near a fuel farm. When a draft report was turned in, the level was changed to 38 parts per billion. The company's final report on the well, issued in 1994, did not mention the benzene.

The Marine Corps had been warned nearly a decade earlier about the dangerously high levels of benzene, which was traced to massive leaks from fuel tanks at the base on the North Carolina coast. The benzene was discovered as part of a broader, ongoing probe into that contamination.

Rep. John D. Dingell, D-Mich., the Chair Emeritus of the House Energy and Commerce

Committee, said the Marines and their families "deserve to know exactly what was in the water."

"I want to know whether there are still toxic chemicals contaminating the water at Camp Lejeune. If there are, what is the Navy's plan for dealing with them?" Dingell said.

Health officials believe as many as 1 million people may have been exposed to tainted water at the base before the wells closed two decades ago. Critics say little information on benzene contamination had been publicly known until recently.

"It is hard to believe that they let Marines and their families drink this water for 30 years and didn't say a word about it when they knew they had a fuel tank farm right by the water supply that was hemorrhaging fuel," Miller said.

North Carolina's congressional delegation has been active on behalf of the health claims of former Camp Lejeune residents.

A bill introduced by Miller would require the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs to provide health care to veterans and their family members who have fallen ill from the water. Miller's bill is identical to the now-rejected Senate bill introduced by Sens. Richard Burr, R-N.C., and Kay Hagan, D-N.C.

Burr called the revelations disturbing.

"It's very likely that this information will significantly change the direction and broaden the scope of the government's scientific inquiry into the water contamination at Camp Lejeune," Burr said.

The Senate passed legislation in September, written by Hagan and co-sponsored by Burr, preventing the military from dismissing claims related to water contamination pending completion of several studies.

Among those is a mortality study that would determine if there are higher mortality rates for those who served at the base during the years water was contaminated.

A Hagan spokesman said that the senator would welcome a hearing, but that her top priority is completion of the studies.

"Right now there are Marines and their families who are sick and seeking answers. It is clear that benzene, a known carcinogen, was in the water supply in dangerous amounts," Hagan said in a statement to AP. "We cannot leave these families with mounting medical problems and half answers."

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